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SUBJECT: OMAN: IFES ELECTIONS ASSESSMENT

¶11. (U) SUMMARY: Under the sponsorship of the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) recently concluded an assessment visit to the Sultanate. The team identified several key areas for potential electoral assistance, including a need for increased public awareness of both the electoral process and the role of the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council.)
END SUMMARY.

Meetings with Election Commission, Parliamentarians

¶12. (U) On December 14, a MEPI-sponsored IFES team arrived in Oman to conduct a technical assessment of the electoral process in the Sultanate. Through a week-long series of governmental, legal, and private-sector meetings, Dr. Paul Harris, Ms. Aileen Hanel and Dr. John Duke Anthony elicited the opinions of election organizers and participants while tentatively identifying potential areas for strengthening. The team met with senior members of the government's election commission, with elected Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) and appointed Majlis al-Dawla (State Council) deputies, as well as academicians, legal consultants, and journalists.

¶13. (SBU) As part of their country assessment, the team provided a debrief to the Embassy MEPI team prior to departure. While preliminary, the IFES team identified several areas where technical assistance could help to strengthen the electoral process in Oman.

Public Education

¶14. (SBU) The IFES team members concluded that educating the public on the election process and the role of the Consultative Council should be a strategic component in election preparations for 2007. (Note: One Majlis deputy told the delegation that Oman might seek to institute municipal elections before the next Shura elections in 2007. End note.) The team suggested developing a civic education curriculum with the Education Ministry as well as promoting greater youth interaction, including children's visits to the Majlis al-Shura and having Majlis members speak at schools in their districts. IFES noted, however, that the Education Ministry resisted playing a role in the 2003 elections.

Voter and Candidate Apathy

¶15. (SBU) The public's widespread apathy towards the Majlis al-Shura and the elections pose considerable challenges to both candidates and the electoral process. The assessment team found that citizens are generally unaware of who the candidates are, what the Majlis does, and why voting would be important. Moreover, several interlocutors commented that some elected candidates lack basic qualifications, including a completed secondary-level education. The IFES team also found that as a result of the low pay and lack of job security, potential qualified candidates were disinclined to run for office.

"Campaign" Strengthening

¶16. (SBU) IFES identified strict limitations on campaign activity as being one of most substantial obstacles in the electoral process in Oman. It contributes immensely to the public's lack of awareness, the election of unqualified candidates, and general voter apathy.

¶17. (U) The IFES team concluded that they had a productive week with enriching meetings. They were pleased with the responsiveness of the Omani government to their questions, and with the candor of other interlocutors. The team said that they intend to provide a summary of their assessment to the Embassy and the MEPI team by the end of March 2005.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) This visit constituted IFES' second attempt at seeking to build a dialogue with the Omani government on election issues, and appears to have made a more favorable first impression than 2003's effort. While it is premature to judge the feasibility of actual technical assistance programs, complicated by the disbandment of Oman's electoral commission, a patient and measured approach should make a substantial contribution to overcoming the government's skepticism about foreign involvement in this sensitive area.
BALTIMORE